

FREDERICK REISS, 1891-1981

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Frederick Reiss was born October 12, 1891 in Memesvolgy, Hungary (now Edelsthal, Austria). It was an era of courtliness and gentility, attributes that seemed to sit naturally on his shoulders. He was Jewish and, at the age of nine, had acquired such fluency in Hebrew that the family rabbi wanted him to study for the rabbinate. However, Frederick's father a small landowner, had other ideas, and enrolled him in a Catholic school which took in a limited number of Jewish boys. (In a speech delivered in 1965, at the 3rd Symposium Dermatologicum Internationale at Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, he said, "Today, a unique opportunity is offered me to express my thankfulness to the Roman Catholic Gymnasium of Bratislava for the fruitful eight years which paved my way to the University of Budapest, and my scientific career.")¹

In 1914 he received his M.D. degree from the Royal Hungarian University in Budapest. He then studied for a year in Vienna. World War I interrupted his studies but, except for a few brief periods at the battle front, he spent his time working in military hospitals. After the war, he began to specialize in dermatology, and was fortunate enough to be able to study with such pioneers in the science as Lewondowsky and Bruno Bloch in Geneva, with Finger, Oppenheim and Kyrle in Vienna, and then back to Budapest where he studied with Professor Nekam.

These varied studies did much to mature him as a dermatologist and led naturally to a growing interest in mycology and tropical diseases. In 1919 this interest took him to London, where he studied tropical medicine under the guidance of Aldo Castellani. He rounded this off with studies in mycology under the pioneer in the field, Prof. Sabouraud at the Hopital St. Louis, and with studies at the Institute of Parasitology under Langeron in Paris.

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So, by the time he was 30 years old, the young physician had received the highest possible standard of academic training that Europe could offer, and he had quite a few years of clinical experience on which to base his future. However, at that period of history there was an antisemitic atmosphere in Hungary. He said later, "I saw the handwriting on the wall and knew that I could not look forward, as a Jewish doctor, to a career in my native land."

In 1922 the now professor Reiss received a leave of absence from the University of Budapest and travelled to Shanghai. Let me quote here his own words in a speech he gave at the ceremony in 1965 when he was presented the George Washington Award by American/Hungarian immigrants.

Now, let me make a few reminiscences. One of my youthful dreams came true as I transferred my professional activities from my native Hungary to Shanghai. I knew little of China when I first debarked, but I was excited by its possibilities.

In 1922, this huge oriental city was a strange mixture of the ancient, the mediaeval and the modern. Here, I started one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. However, apart from all other considerations, it was an unexplored field for an investigative and imaginative dermatologist. . . .

Chinese ancient medicine has a kernel of merit which doubtlessly must have an enduring place in scientific medicine. (For instance, the modern drug, "Ephedrin" was found to be the active principle in a Chinese herb medicine used from antiquity to stimulate circulation and for asthma.) Nevertheless, despite the good elements which existed, medicine in China was permeated by superstition.

In such an atmosphere it was not easy to establish a medical center based on western principles. There were only a few western hospitals and only four medical colleges.

Fortunately for all, the father of modern China, the late Sun Yat Sen, had studied medicine in Britain, and he encouraged the sons of well-to-do families to pursue medical studies abroad. A group of physicians who had studied in Germany founded the Tung Dai Medical College, and that is where my pioneering of teaching dermatology in China began.²

Reiss worked here for five years, and at the same time he also worked at the Pasteur Institute in Shanghai. His next appointment made him chief of the dermatological department of the National Medical College in Shanghai. He held this chair for eight years.

To borrow his own words again, he said:

This proved to be a most challenging assignment. The Rockefeller Foundation endowed this institution and encouraged us to elevate research to the highest possible level. . . . In 1937, an up-to-date medical school opened its gates, and was comparable to any of the better American medical schools. Unfortunately it did not last long because of the Japanese occupation. The school was moved

to Chunking for the duration of the war, and I returned to the Shanghai Red Cross General Hospital. During this period, I conducted courses in Dermatology at St. John's University Medical College and at the Christian Women's Medical College.³

By this time, Reiss was, by training and experience, a dermatologist of world stature. In 1935 he had returned to Budapest to attend the ninth International Congress of Dermatology, where he presented a paper on a hitherto unknown type, tuberculoid leprosy.

Before leaving the 20-year period of his life in China, one should mention some of his other activities which help to place him, along with Aldo Castellani, as a humanitarian activist who had the energy necessary to strive to apply the benefits of modern medicine to large numbers of those afflicted by disease.

It was he who organized the first national leprosarium in China. He recalls this period in the following words.

The study of leprosy had excited my curiosity ever since my early acquaintance with the Bible. The segregation of these unfortunate patients had its beginning in those days. Shanghai alone had over 2,500 victims of the disease, but our Leprosarium could only take 110 patients. I worked with Chinese physicians and Christian Missionaries. We stimulated leprosy legislation, but to hospitalize several hundred thousand patients, amongst the over 1,000,000 sufferers who needed institutional care, was a herculean task. This was the basis of my annual radio appeal on behalf of the Chinese Mission to Lepers. The results were gratifying but were only a beginning of the effort to come to grips with a truly devastating problem.⁴

We can glimpse here something of the spirit of Frederick Reiss. He had the generosity and magnanimity needed to start giant medical projects, and he had the faith to believe that his modest beginnings would somehow find supporters who would bring his aspirations to fruition.

Another incident that reveals his humanitarianism concerns his activities on behalf of the Jews. As a faithful Jew, he was worried about the fate of his fellow Jews who were suffering in Europe. He was also interested in the Zionist movement. A news article in the *Monitor*, a B'Nai B'Rith publication, records his feeling after a visit to Palestine. . . . "When I touched the soil of Eretz Yisrael, I felt its sacredness. I saw at once, in front of my eyes, our history. It is an experience of its own. This unique phenomenon of human history, the Jewish nation, after 2,000 years, reviving the Hebrew language, belongs to the greatest miracles of our century. . . ."⁵

These sentiments were soon put to the test. As may be expected, he had the courage of his convictions when confronted by the problem created in

Shanghai by the large numbers of European Jews who took refuge there from the barbarity of Hitler. In 1939 he created The Medical Board for the Assistance of Central European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai. Concerning this time, he said, "For suffering and privation, there is no remedy but striving and acting."

Amongst the source material for this article is a revealing collection of letters of appeal written personally by Frederick Reiss in an effort to raise funds in Shanghai to cope with the medical needs of the weakened but mushrooming refugee community. Their numbers had swollen to almost 20,000. The letters are not sentimental. They are an urgent plea, in concrete terms and down-to-earth style, for the money needed.

By 1941 he was gratified to see that a general hospital had been established. It was staffed by 64 refugee physicians, many local specialists, and many missionary physicians. Frederick Reiss comes through not as a mere academic but as a physician completely committed to spending himself for the afflicted.

Two months before Pearl Harbor, the American Consular Service asked Reiss to leave China for America. Speaking about the upheaval, he remarked, "The threatening crisis ended an enterprise of hope, but I have some satisfaction in saying, of partial fulfillment."

As an immigrant to America, Frederick Reiss began a new chapter of his life. In 1935, during his return visit to Budapest, he had married. His former teacher, Professor Nekam, was best man at the wedding. Of this event, he is recorded as having said, "The summit of my nonscientific ambitions was attained in 1935 when I won the heart of my beloved Clara, a perpetual inspiration for all of my endeavours."

On arriving in California in 1941 he found waiting for him a letter from Dr. Alan Gregg of the Rockefeller Foundation, which had sponsored his work in Shanghai, inviting him to New York.

After his arrival in New York, he was appointed to Cornell Medical College and also became associate professor of clinical dermatology at New York University. Here he was requested to organize the first dermatological research laboratory and mycology clinic at Bellevue Hospital. Then, in 1944, he was appointed Chief of Skin Service at Montefiore Hospital, and he remained in that position for 30 years until he was hospitalized there in the midseventies.

In 1948 he organized the first symposium in the United States on medical mycology under the auspices of the New York Academy of Sciences. Reiss's introduction to the monograph published as a result of

the symposium merits brief paraphrase because it shows him in the field where he was most at home:

Mycology had an earlier start than bacteriology, but towards the end of the last century, the epoch-making discoveries of Pasteur and Koch in the field of infectious diseases brought bacteriology to the fore and relegated mycology to the background.

During the War, the high incidence of athlete's foot (50%) and the aggravation of fungus diseases (pre-existing) among those sent to the tropics, kept us mindful of the medical importance of mycology. Also, although the death rate through deep mycoses is comparatively low, it is still higher than the rate of death caused by the whole enteric group, tetanus, and infantile paralysis combined.

The enzymatic-pathogenic action of dermatophytes is not yet clear . . . nor have the mechanisms of immunity been clarified to the same degree as they are for many bacterial infections. . . . The treatment of superficial mycoses with fatty acids is a step forward, but research on why so many patients resist this therapy is lagging behind. . . . Neither the mode of transmission nor their prevention is fully understood, whereas the prevention of plant mycoses has been accomplished. . . . Prophylactic vaccination, if perfected, would be just as desirable against fungus diseases as it is against diphtheria, tetanus, etc. . . .

Penicillin seems to be a valuable drug against deep mycoses, but nothing has eliminated the seriousness of the prognosis. . . . Lack of familiarity of the profession with mycoses is often responsible for wrong diagnosis, e.g., the cause of pulmonary calcification is not necessarily tuberculosis. However, there is no satisfactory treatment for coccidioidomycosis and nothing is known of the manner of transmission of histoplasmosis . . . etc. In this country much progress has been made, but there remains much to be done. . . .⁴

The above paraphrase gives a good idea of his thinking as a mycologist, but, along with his scientific papers, he sometimes wrote in a philosophical manner about "true love of humanity." The following pertinent lines reveal his life-view: "The mystery of life can only be solved through Faith and through the knowledge that it is a mistake to try and explain life in terms of materialism only. . . . We must liberate ourselves from blind technology and a cosmos created by physicists. . . ."

In 1965 he addressed a graduating class in Austria in the following words:

During the last century and part of the one before, it was widely held that there was an irreconcilable conflict between knowledge and belief. The opinion prevailed among numerous scientists and philosophers that belief should be replaced by knowledge based on scientifically proven facts. We admit that science may give us a clear idea of many hitherto mysterious phenomena, but science by itself is not in a position to chart the goal of our moral aspirations. In western culture, it is the Jewish-Christian religious tradition which teaches us a high goal, and gives us a firm moral foundation for our aspirations as well as a noble pattern for the true love of humanity. . . .⁵

The above words, because they reveal a lot about Frederick Reiss as a man, help us to understand him better. The final section of this essay will attempt to point out his deep spirit of internationalism.

Firstly, his education was international. He spoke fluent German, French and English, in addition to his native Hungarian. His native country, which he loved, was not kind to him because of his Jewish background, so he went to a different world. He became fluent in Chinese and spent 20 years of his life immersed in an Oriental culture. He lived in Shanghai, famous for its large international community. Then he went to the New World, a boiling pot of different nationalities, and there he mixed continually with leaders in dermatology and mycology. He belonged to numerous scientific and dermatological societies and became well known in dermatological circles throughout the world.

For Frederick Reiss, medicine knew no boundaries. Progress in dermatology was to be made through the cooperation of all doctors irrespective of their nationalities. This was as much an axiom with him as it was with Aldo Castellani.

At the Second World Congress of the International Society of Tropical Dermatology, Aldo Castellani's greeting recalled, "In 1954, at the International Congress of Tropical Medicine and Malaria held in Lisbon, I had the good fortune to meet again Professor Reiss who had done some interesting research work with me in London. The thought came to me that this is the very person who can help me realize my plan to establish the international society which I had in mind. He is a keen tropicalist who has worked in many countries and speaks a number of foreign languages. (He spoke seven fluently.) In addition, he has a charming personality. I mentioned my idea to him and he is enthusiastic." Mrs. Reiss informed me that she thought that Professor Castellani asked her husband to undertake the organization of the Society because of "his very warm outgoing personality and ease in communicating with people."

Speaking about the same event, Professor Reiss stated in his speech of acceptance of the George Washington Award, "It was a source of considerable honor and privilege when my great teacher and friend, Aldo Castellani, invited me to organize the International Society of Tropical Dermatology." This Society was to prove a full-time occupation. From 1960 until 1973 he was secretary-general of the Society, and spared no efforts to ensure that the Society fulfilled the charter for which it was created. It can truthfully be said that the Society owes its existence to the concern for dermatology, the humanitarianism, and the internationalism

not only of Aldo Castellani but also of Frederick Reiss.⁹

At the time he got the above-mentioned award, Professor Reiss said, I have never been under the illusion of having achieved anything epochal, but I have been an unrelenting brick-layer in projects to help others to build structures which make life worthwhile. . . . Much has been accomplished in Dermatology during the last two or three decades, but there are still many unsolved problems to which we must address ourselves. We have a younger generation who can carry on where we have left off. . . .¹⁰

I feel honored to have been associated with Frederick Reiss. In 1977, after he had been hospitalized, he wrote to me asking me to collate some facts about his friend Dr. Ota Masao, one of the first dermatologists in modern Japanese medicine. I did this for him and, along with a letter from the son of Dr. Ota, this was Professor Reiss's last published paper.¹¹ I mention this personal experience as an example of the wide-ranging interest which Frederick Reiss had in people, no matter what their nationality might be.

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